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ABSTRACT

One of a series dealing with current issues affecting language arts instruction, this paper focuses on teaching gifted and talented students. The paper begins by identifying two kinds of students who present problems not adequately distinguished in school programs or in the professional literature: students thought to suffer because they are not challenged enough, and students thought to suffer because they are not challenged in the right way with the right kind of thing. This is followed by a brief description of the pioneering work begun by L. M. Terman in 1921 on the characteristics of gifted children and the long-term consequences of giftedness. The criteria used to identify the two kinds of gifted students are then discussed as well as the need to concentrate on specific curricular measures. The paper concludes with eight strategies of action--four for identifying the gifted and talented student and four addressing curricular concerns. (HOD)

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# STARTER SHEET

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SLATE Support for the Learning and Teaching of English

## GIFTED AND TALENTED EDUCATION

### The Issue

What is the problem that gifted and talented education seeks to address? Two very different problems need to be distinguished here, problems often not adequately distinguished in school programs or in the professional literature.

The first problem is presented by the student who does well in school as far as school goes (often called "scholastically" or "academically" gifted) but who is thought to need a more intensive or concentrated dose of the kind of thing school ordinarily offers. The second problem is presented by the student who, though gifted, is *not* doing well in school (sometimes called the "underachieving" student) and who thus presumably needs something *other than* the kind of thing school ordinarily offers.

The first kind of student may be thought to suffer because he or she is not challenged *enough;* the second kind of student may be thought to suffer because he or she is not challenged *in the right way with the right kind of thing.* The first problem might be remedied by giving students more of what they need within the standard context of schooling. In the second case, it is this standard context itself that is called into question. Of the two situations, the second presents the greater difficulty.

In practice, these categories may merge. For example, it may be thought that the "good" students may be trusted with more independence and allowed to do projects of their own devising, or projects that are more unstructured. These students can disappoint, however, by showing no inclination to give up the docile behaviors that may have gotten them selected as "good" in the first place. Here we have to decide whether we think we can help these students best by taking advantage of their docility to make them work harder, or whether we want to address the docility as itself a problem. Thus our attempts to deal with the first kind of student raise questions of the sort associated with the second kind of student.

### Professional Viewpoints: Background

The pioneering work on the characteristics of gifted (high IQ) children and the long-term consequences of giftedness is that of Terman, begun in 1921, and reported in, for example, Terman, 1959. Terman noted that the "success" of the intellectually gifted depended on factors other than their high IQ s, factors such as "will" and "motivation to life success." He paid almost no attention to socioeconomic context, however, and his sampling procedures would have tended to exclude students from non-standard English speaking groups and from low socioeconomic levels. An important critique of Terman is found in Gould (1981).

Terman's research into the characteristics and subsequent life histories of gifted children did not result in notable educational changes. Sputnik I, launched in 1957, did. In 1958, the National Defense Education Act was passed; it sponsored a nationwide talent search and provided funds for programs for potential scientists and mathematicians.

The definition of giftedness implied by the NDEA was expanded in 1972, during a series of conferences sponsored by the United States Office of Education (Marland, 1972). Additional federal funds were made available in 1974, following the Marland report.

In 1981, all specific grant funds for the gifted were subsumed under the federal block grants, Public Law 97-35, the Education Consolidation Improvement Act of 1981. Today, gifted programs are supported primarily by state and local funds, along with some block grant money.

Two advocacy groups that support gifted education are the National Association for Gifted Children and the Council for Exceptional Children.

### Identifying Gifted Students

The two kinds of gifted students specified above need to be identified in different ways. The first kind might be identified by grades, achievement test scores, and teacher recommendations. With the second kind of student, however, these measures are precisely what will not identify the student, as is pointed out by SLATE's Starter Sheet, "Providing for the Intellectually Gifted" (Tuttle, 1979).

In the research, the criterion for giftedness is usually the IQ score. Using this criterion, Gear (1976), Hall (1983), and Geffen (1983) report that teacher nomination was only fifty percent

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accurate in identifying gifted students. Peer nomination has been found to be a reliable indicator in the elementary grades (Jenkins, 1979), but in a study of seventh graders, Lin (1981) found that peer nomination ranked below teacher nomination, and that teacher nomination was again only about fifty percent accurate. Training has been shown to improve teacher scores somewhat (Gear, 1978), but of course not just any training will do. The commonly used checklists are clearly inadequate to achieve recognition of the underachiever, and no checklist has by itself been shown to be adequate for this purpose (Hall, 1983).

Furthermore, Renzulli (1979) and others have strongly criticized the IQ criterion for its tendency to exclude creative and productive students.

All the problems pointed out above are magnified when teachers are dealing with culturally different students. (See Yarborough and Johnson, 1983).

Gifted students will not be gifted in the same ways, and gifted students of the kind not identified by the standard tests will not reveal their giftedness in the same ways. While it is no doubt useful for teachers to become familiar with the types of underachieving students that have been identified (Hall, 1983), there is now no generally accepted means of identifying all gifted students, nor does it seem likely that a standardized test will ever be developed that will do the job.

General categories clearly will not do the job. How do you look seriously for a student with "above average ability"? Specific details are needed if the description is to be useful in helping us find what we are looking for. But highly developed categories can appear to be exhaustive, and this is dangerous. It is crucial to remember that any set of categories needs constantly to be evaluated in comparison to real students and in the light of our educational purposes. We should focus on including rather than excluding students (Sid W. Richardson Foundation, 1985).

Schools tend to identify as gifted only those students who are caught by the standard tests, and to orient their programs toward these students. We should be aware that schools, as self-perpetuating institutions, will be motivated *not* to recognize students of the second kind. When we identify students of the first kind—those who need more of what we offer—we can say to the school boards and taxpayers: "We're OK, you're OK. We just need more to work with." When we identify students of the second kind, we have to say to ourselves, and to the school's supporters, that we—all of us—may not be doing the right kind of thing. We may have to acknowledge a need not just for growth, but also for change, and the change may not be "just" educational.

Finally, some governing bodies may need to be reminded that a commitment to identify gifted students should always be accompanied by a commitment to do something to help the students. Any gifted program will bring with it, however, the temptation to identify as gifted only those students who can be helped by the program. We can help ourselves avoid this vicious circle by reminding each other that the program exists to help students, and not the other way around.

## Curriculum for the Gifted and Talented

We may think of curriculum change as change in the subject matter (e.g., Swicord, 1984), or as change in the relations between subject, learner, and teacher (e.g., Moffett and Wagner, 1976). Programs in "enrichment" concentrate on change in the subject matter. If they are motivated by the desire to address the second kind of problem we have identified, gifted programs must concentrate on the second, more demanding, kind of curriculum change.

When a need for "gifted programs" is recognized, a common response is to call for teachers more versed in their subject matter. This may be helpful, but it will not help meet the needs of the student who is not being challenged in the right way with the right kind of thing. For this student, we must investigate what Bruner (1966) calls "the psychology of the subject matter," not just the needs of the subject. This investigation may cause us in turn to consider how the scene for learning may affect the learner and comment upon the subject. Teaching about the citizen's obligations in a democracy, for example, may not have much effect in a situation that is unrelievedly autocratic.

The literature continues to debate the virtues of different specific curricular measures—whether to track or to mainstream or to "pull out" students identified as gifted; whether to use gifted students as teachers; whether to have resource rooms, or writing corners, or a mentor system; whether to institute field trips and other special activities. "Pull-out" programs, for example, were recently criticized in Sid W. Richardson Foundation (1985). Too often these debates proceed in narrow terms—in terms of their effect on test scores, for example. It is crucial to consider specific curricular measures not in narrow terms, but in terms of what we believe to be the purposes of education. No technique is bad in itself—cutting someone with a knife may be fine in surgery—but any technique can be misused. The key is not in our processes but in our purposes (Perkins, 1981).

Furthermore, we have seen that our expectations of performance can have a powerful effect on the kinds of performance we get (Diederich, 1974). Thus our inquiry into how to treat some students as gifted and talented should be pressed toward an inquiry into how to treat all of our students as gifted and talented.

## Strategies for Action

Identifying the Gifted and Talented Student

1. Keep in mind the distinction between the two kinds of problems presented by gifted and talented students.
2. Become familiar with some of the ways in which "underachieving" students of the second kind can present their giftedness in school. See, for example, Khatena, 1982. Network with teachers and State Departments of Education. Exchange stories.
3. Be aware of the motive not to recognize as gifted those who are not doing well in school or are not the kind of student the established program is designed to help.
4. Use many different ways to identify the "underachievers." See Tuttle's 1979 SLATE Starter Sheet "Providing for the Intellectually Gifted." Remember the aim is to help students, not justify programs.

Curriculum

1. Understand that we may need change not just in the organization and pace of presentation of the subject matter, but in the relations between the teacher, the subject, and the learner. Curriculum itself may be modified in terms of content, process, or environment.



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2. Think in terms not just of coverage, but of depth, and of different kinds of relations to the subject, different kinds of learning actions. Some of the actions that could be considered are writing, drawing, composing, building, inventing, investigating, analyzing, and debating.
3. It is well established that individualization must be the basic response to the problem we address here (see, e.g., Hannigan, 1984; Moffett, 1968; Sid W. Richardson Foundation, 1985). But we must remember that it is our attitudes and purposes that will determine whether a particular technique "works" for gifted education or not. We should continue to make efforts to articulate these attitudes and purposes; we cannot assume that they are self-evident or universally agreed upon. Such articulated statements are not mere window dressing, and the *continuing* effort to articulate them can be extremely important to teachers, individually and collectively.
4. Understand the role of risk-taking. All learning depends importantly on the willingness to take certain risks. Gifted students of the first type identified in this Starter Sheet may be unwilling to take risks. Furthermore, teachers should be sensitive to the social risks that students taking intellectual risks may be subject to. Teachers themselves may have to take risks to reveal themselves as learners, and in their efforts to change the learning situation, for example by sponsoring students who undertake projects that investigate real problems critically.

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